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ABSTRACT

The term "syllabus" usually refers to an outline statement of what is to be taught and learned in a particular course. Among the several types of statements for language-teaching syllabuses are the grammatical, notional, and situational. These statements are not in themselves syllabuses but can be called pre-syllabuses. A grammatical pre-syllabus is simply a statement of the grammar of the language, viewed from a teaching point of view. A notional pre-syllabus suggests material that appears relevant and well suited to the interests, capacities, and needs of the learners of a particular course. The term "situational" is used in differing ways. It is generally used in reference to the situation in which a piece of syntax is presented so that it may be well understood and meaningfully practiced. In creating any syllabus there has to be a selection from these various pre-syllabuses. There is a need to select grammatical features, notional ones as well as situational features. The distinction between pre-syllabus and syllabus is basic, the latter being which is chosen for a particular course and the former what it is chosen from. In the end, the creation of a syllabus depends upon what the learners want to learn. (Author/CFM)

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Pre-syllabuses and syllabuses in the light of the learner's opportunities, aims, and needs

What we generally mean by the term 'syllabus' is an outline statement of what is to be taught and learnt in a particular course - what use of vocabulary and syntax, and what ways of saying various kinds of thing (e.g. asking for something or expressing hope or regret), and all this of course for the purposes of communication - understanding somebody (as in reading) or making oneself understood as well (as in conversation). The syllabus may also include statements about aims and methods, but these are not of the essence. The essential thing about a syllabus is that it states what should be taught in a particular course, a course for a particular kind of learner.

Now a syllabus is a selection. Nobody tries to teach the whole language, and no matter how inexpertly and even unconsciously the selection is made, selection is there - of words, syntax, styles or registers of speech, sometimes stress and intonation patterns, and so on.

From what do we select? Often, it seems from nothing clearly defined. The selection is frequently haphazard, in spite of all that has been written about it, and is based on no clear awareness of what there is to select from. Obviously one might discuss the principles of selection at considerable length; a fairly thorough statement, still valid in most respects except that it does not take account of views on 'notional' syllabuses, has been made in Mackey's Language Teaching Analysis (1965). One can distinguish statements of various types about a language, statements which need to be regarded as sources on which one can and indeed must draw. Normally it is not the teacher who makes the selection of what to teach, but those who write the teaching materials (and where several textbook courses are in use there may well be selection along conflicting lines). Elsewhere (1) I have distinguished several types of statement which may, so to speak, serve language-teaching syllabuses: grammatical statements, 'notional' statements, 'situational' statements, and perhaps statements about learners' interests.

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(1) See 'What Types of Syllabus for the Teaching of English, as a Foreign or Second Language?' in the International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching, XV/3, 1977.

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These statements are not in themselves syllabuses, since they do not underlie particular courses. Looking at them from a pedagogical point of view, I call them pre-syllabuses.

A grammatical pre-syllabus is simply a statement of the grammar of the language, viewed from a teaching point of view. For a notional pre-syllabus we look to such sources as 'The Threshold Level' (van Ek)[2] - admittedly not a full statement - and A Communicative Grammar of English (Leech and Svartik, 1975), and would choose from the material listed and exemplified there what appears to be relevant and well suited to the interests, capacities, and needs (if we know them) of the learners taking a particular course. 'Notional' is an odd word, and perhaps a vogue-word, and 'situational' is even more awkward, since it is used in considerably differing senses. Its established use (at least in discussion of language teaching) is in reference to the situation in which (especially) a piece of syntax is presented so that it may well be understood and meaningfully practised. Thus - to take a simple example - a comparative form such as adjective + er + than is not presented except in association with things that can be compared (somebody, let us say, is taller or shorter than somebody else, or something is heavier or lighter than something else; if the 'situation' is not there, if things are lacking, we have teaching of mere forms ('bare bones' grammar) and not use of these forms as a way of communicating facts. But 'situation' is also used in other senses: for instance, to refer to the circumstances in which the learner might need to use some part of the language in so-called 'real life' later. Thus, an adult learner might be in a situation which called for the use of polite sales approaches, so would need such phrases as May I show you...?, Would you like..., If I may suggest something..., and so on. Using the word 'situation' in this sense, D. Wilkins rightly comes to the conclusion that 'a situational syllabus is not suitable for a general language course, although it might be valuable in certain narrowly definable contexts of learning'. Here I do not use the word in this sense, but in the sense previously mentioned. In teaching a foreign language, the syntactical and other material (including 'notional' material) of which we would like the learners to have a secure command, so that they can readily use it in communication with others, should be embodied in actions and activities, carried out or seen

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(2) The Threshold Level in a European Unit/Credit System for Modern Language Learning by Adults, J.A. van Ek. Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1975.

or imagined, which are of interest to the learners at their age of learning and, also, which light up the way in which the syntactical or other feature is used. Thus in teaching communicative use of a 'comparative structure' one looks round for situations (in this sense) in which comparison is a natural activity, and makes use of the kind of comparisons that interest the kind of learners concerned; or, alternatively, one chooses situations of interest and bases the communicative grammar and other teaching on those; or, preferably, as far as selection for syllabus-making or course-making are concerned, one does both things, starting as it were from both ends, with situations that are interesting and the grammar and 'notions' that are necessary. I am not of course denying the relevance of situations in the other sense I have mentioned, particularly in the teaching of adults.

The grammatical pre-syllabus is a full or fairly full description of the language from a grammatical point of view, the 'notional' pre-syllabus a similar statement from a 'notional' point of view. In creating any syllabus, there has to be selection from these. The same is true of a 'situational' pre-syllabus, which would be a full list of situations (in the sense in which I have used the word) which are of sufficient interest to the kind of learners concerned and which can also 'go with', be associated with, be involved with, grammatical or 'notional' features of the language. I do not know that such a description or statement of situations exists in any readily accessible form, but from it a selection would also of course have to be made for particular courses.

Undoubtedly further types of pre-syllabus can be visualised, which is simply to say that different kinds of content need to be included in every syllabus - not only a selection of grammatical features but also a selection of 'situational' features. One other type of pre-syllabus would be a full statement of types of learner interest; some attention has been given to this aspect of the content of syllabuses and curricula, but in an unsystematic way. But types of learner interest must be given expression in specific syllabuses too, and this again means selection.

Selection is no easy matter, and the successful combination of the various elements into a single syllabus, which will not be a grammatical, 'notional', or 'situational' one, but at least all of these, is difficult. But the distinction between pre-syllabus and syllabus is basic, the latter being what is chosen for a particular course and the former what it is chosen from.

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The learners' aims and needs are linked with the learners' opportunities. If they are living - for example, as immigrants - in a community which speaks the language they are trying to learn, they will not have to look far for opportunities of using it: indeed, they will soon need to use it in everyday life. They will need to understand the language as spoken rapidly and in a variety of ways by the native speakers around them and they will have to make themselves understood. Their aim, and their teacher's aim, if they have one, will be the ability to cope with their general linguistic environment. These aims, needs, and opportunities should determine what is taken from the various pre-syllabuses for inclusion in any syllabus, from elementary to advanced. High regard must be paid to immediate occupational linguistic needs (preferably observed on the spot, as explained in Jupp and Milne's Industrial English) or to children's immediate linguistic needs in the school classroom and playground. Colloquialisms and slang cannot be overlooked, nor can local dialect. The 'notional' material will be that most required in daily circumstances. The 'situational' material, even in the classroom, should draw heavily on local everyday subject-matter.

Much of the language-learning will be unsystematic, the result of being thrown in at the deep end, and classroom instruction should aim at correcting and clarifying, as well as supplementing, what is picked up in the streets. It is otherwise in a learning environment where the language being learnt is not in general circulation and is rarely heard. Opportunities are much poorer, and especially so where lesson-periods are few and spread over a long period of time: moreover, the teacher may not be an accurate and confident speaker of the language, and suitable reading-matter may be scarce. What should be the relation between pre-syllabuses and syllabuses in such a learning environment? If the learner is adult, he may have an immediate vocational need, and this can (if sufficient is known about it) determine the subject-matter, vocabulary, and to some extent syntax of a course, and also the choice of 'notional' features. Otherwise - and especially with children, possibly not old enough to have learning aims reaching beyond the lesson itself - the selection ought not to depend on what they are likely to find useful years and years later - but on what they need now, at the time of learning, in order to communicate with others (particularly their fellow-learners in the class) on matters of interest to them at the time of learning. This is their need, if their interest in the language learning is to be maintained: and this should play a large part in determining the selection of grammar and 'notions' and everything else.

/Can..

Can the practising teacher help to create syllabuses? Yes, if the practising teacher knows the kind of learner well and can speak from his or her teaching experience about what the learners like to do, and like to talk about, read about, and write about. It should all come back in the end to the learners and the learners' interests.

March 1978. W.R. Lee.